

Senator Hutchison

Aviation Subcommittee Hearing on The Aviation Delay Prevention Act March 29, 2001

Good Morning. This is the first meeting of the Aviation Subcommittee in the 107th Congress. Welcome.

Today, the Subcommittee considers legislation that will bring real relief to the hundreds of millions of passengers that have been suffering through delays and cancellations in our passenger aviation system. The Aviation Delay Prevention Act will reduce or eliminate the red tape that communities must cut through to build runways, terminals and airports.

I would like to thank my colleague, the Ranking Minority member of the Subcommittee, Senator Rockefeller for working with me and cosponsoring this legislation.

I am sure that many people in this room are, by necessity, frequent fliers. So you know how bad it is out there. More than twenty-five percent of the scheduled flights last year were delayed or canceled. The length of the average delay has also increased, despite the extra “fudge time” built into most flights by the airlines to compensate for delays they know are going to occur.

Not coincidentally, the number of annual air travelers is also rising. 674 million people flew through U.S. airports in 2000. The Federal Aviation Administration estimates that this number will increase to more than 1 billion by the end of this decade. To meet this increased demand, the number of scheduled flights has also increased.

However, there has not been a commensurate increase in the number of new aviation facilities. Only one major airport has opened in the last decade (in Denver), and only a handful of new runways and terminals have been completed to deal with the new demand. Unfortunately, the process for making capital improvements to existing airports is painfully slow and easily thwarted by well-organized groups who delay a new runway until it becomes impossibly expensive and too much trouble to build.

Unless we significantly expand the capacity of our aviation system, we will not be able to meet the growing demand for air travel. Air fares will skyrocket and delays will continue to spread across the system. The loss to American productivity, from millions of hours lost while sitting on an airport tarmac, will be incalculable.

Fixing the problem will call for more infrastructure and better air traffic control facilities. But we must face the challenge **now** so these new runways and terminals can be ready before we have a real crisis on our hands.

Until now, most of the focus here in Congress has been on passenger service. The Commerce Committee recently reported a bill, which I cosponsored, to require airlines to live up to their promises to provide improved customer service, especially during delays and cancellations. Passenger service is critical, but the real cause of consumers' frustration is the explosive growth in the number and length of flight delays. This bill gets to the heart of that issue.

The bill instructs the Secretary to develop a procedure to ensure that the approval process for runways, terminals and airports is streamlined. Federal, state, regional and local reviews would take place simultaneously, not one after the other.

In no way would this mean that environmental laws would be ignored or broken. The bill does not limit the grounds on which a lawsuit may be filed. It simply provides the community with a reasonable time line to get an answer. If that answer is "no," then the region is free to explore other transportation options.

The bill also addresses the unfortunate practice of the airlines to over schedule at peak hours. At many airports, these schedules are so densely packed that, even in perfect weather conditions throughout the country, there is no way the airlines could possibly meet them. The result is chronically late flights.

The bill directs the Secretary to study the busiest airports and to make recommendations to reduce congestion and over scheduling. Any such program would have to be imposed with a sensitivity toward small communities and the maintenance of their aviation links to the rest of the country.

The legislation also grants the airlines a limited antitrust exemption, so that they may consult with one another, subject to the Secretary's approval, to re-schedule flights from the most congested hours to off-peak times.

We have all experienced flights that push away from the gate only to languish for hours on the tarmac waiting to take off. The current system logs these flights as on-time departures. This legislation would change the definition of "on-time departure" to mean that the flight is **airborne** within 20 minutes of its scheduled departure time.

Our national economic health depends upon the reliability of our aviation system. If we fail to act now, that reliability will be placed in serious jeopardy.